

## **Cleaning House in Philadelphia**

Lobster tails. Filet mignon. A \$17,150 party with belly dancers and Swiss yodelers. Gifts of \$796 suitcases. Nights at a luxury hotel where you will “enjoy a restful sleep because each sensory detail has been carefully refined to be just right.”

This isn't a prize package on a game show. It's a taste of how the nation's fourth-largest public housing agency squandered tax dollars that are meant to provide safe, affordable housing for low-income people.

The mess at the Philadelphia Housing Authority shows the worst that can happen when the federal government doles out money, then doesn't check to make sure that money is used for its intended purpose. The housing authority receives hundreds of millions of dollars from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development every year, nearly \$370 million this year and about \$127 million in stimulus funds.

The then-executive director of the housing authority and top executives enjoyed annual out-of-town retreats at expensive hotels, spending more than \$76,000 on two retreats in 2009 alone. The executive director secretly settled sexual harassment complaints against him for \$648,000. The housing agency has spent \$38.3 million since 2007 on legal costs, riddled with conflicts of interest and questionable spending.

For more than eight months, I've worked to get the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development in Washington to pay attention to the disaster unfolding just a two-hour train ride away.

When the federal housing secretary finally got involved after letters from me and dozens of scandalous local headlines, he found an entrenched board and the finances in such a mess that he had to bring in an outside accounting firm to try to make sense of the books. Eventually, the federal department stopped the legal payments, managed to get the entire housing authority board to resign, and took over day-to-day operations. Without investigative reporting from local newspapers and congressional oversight, these issues might never have been brought to light.

The clean-up is good news, but the misspent tax dollars likely are gone forever. Even if the housing authority gets back on track, poor management and wasteful spending could resume when the federal officials turn their attention elsewhere. I'll continue to press for aggressive oversight and lasting reforms from the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Philadelphia. A cavalier attitude with tax dollars is unconscionable anywhere, but especially in a city where 100,000 families and individuals are on a waiting list for affordable housing. It's fair to speculate that many of these families are not enjoying “a restful sleep because each sensory detail has been carefully refined to be just right.”